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The Aspern Papers: Constructing an American National Identity*

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Key words : American literature, national identity, culture-as-difference

アメリカ文学とアメリカの国民性との問題は、長年考察が繰り返されてきた。その問題とは、ヨーロッパの文化と文学的伝統は、確かにアメリカ文学に影響を及ぼしてきたが、それでもなお、アメリカには、その文化特有の文学的伝統が存在するはずであるというものである。この問題意識は、『アスパンの文書』（*The Aspern Papers*, 1888）の一人称の語り手にも見られる。本研究では、この語り手に注目し、アメリカ文学と国民性の問題を考察する。

『アスパンの文書』は、作家ヘンリー・ジェイムズにとっての重大な時期に書かれ、作家と作品あるいは作家と批評家といった、「書く行為」そのものへの洞察を含んでいる。そして、その主題と複雑に関連しながら、従来の「国際小説のテーマ」が重要な役割を果たしていることは注目に値する。

作品は、語り手が、ヴェニスでの経験を回想する形で展開する。アメリカ人である語り手は、ヨーロッパ在住のアメリカ人であるジュリアナ・ボルドローやその姪ティーナと、「アスパンの文書」の所有をめぐる葛藤を経験したのであった。「アスパンの文書」は、ジェフリー・アスパンが、かつての恋人ジュリアナに送ったとされ手紙の束である。アスパンの死後、長年を経た後に、その所在が「発見」されたのだという。語り手によると、アスパンは、アメリカ文学の祖ともいえる詩人である。アスパンの文学は、粗野なアメリカの文化環境の中からアメリカ文学を生み出し、また一方で、ヨーロッパ文化の洗礼を受けながらも、アメリカ的本質を備えているということである。彼は、手紙を奪い、そのアスパンの「真実」を確立することで、本質的なアメリカ文学というものを確立したいと考えたのだった。

語り手は、身元を偽ってジュリアナの屋敷に下宿人として入り込むが、結局ジュリアナは没し、手紙はジュリアナの姪ティーナに渡る。ティーナは、アスパンの手紙と引き換えに語り手に結婚を迫るが、語り手は逃げ出し、手紙は燃

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やされてしまったという。語り手の損失は、アスペンの手紙だけにとどまらない。語り手が、現在も繰り返し惜しむほどに、何か別のものを損失したのである。

語り手の計画が失敗したことで、様々な問題が解明されないままとなった。それはアメリカ文学の本質や、国民性の解明の失敗を示唆している。そして、存在自体も不確定な手紙を奪い、アスペンとの同一化を画策する語り手の姿、ヴェニスにおけるアメリカ人達の不安定なアイデンティティの有り様が浮き彫りになるのである。そもそも作品の本質的価値や本質的国民性とは存在するのか。それらはむしろ相対的なものであり、語り手の位置からは認識できないもののである。

This paper will discuss Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* in relation to the idea of American identity and literature as distinct from those of European countries, the Old World.

I

The Aspern Papers is about the project of the first person narrator and its failure. It is a project to establish an American literature and American identity. The story unfolds over the possession of "the Aspern papers" whose existence has yet to be proved. The papers are supposed to be a bundle of love letters written by Jeffrey Aspern. Aspern is an American poet who has deceased about half a century before. The narrator intends to wrest the papers from the hands of Juliana Bordereau, who is said to have been one of Aspern's lovers and to be in possession of the papers. In the same way as the American continent was "discovered," Juliana Bordereau and the papers come to light from out of their obscurity (3). The papers are just love letters, but they are valuable for the narrator because they contain Aspern's "truth" – a key to American literature. It seems that the narrator believes that the letters can even be considered "the answer to the riddle of the universe" (2).

On the one hand, it seems that there can be no doubt as to the narrator's failure; he cannot obtain what he initially intends to. On the other, the "loss" (96), which is mentioned in the final statement of the story, has led critics to various views. In the last scene, the narrator writes, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss – I mean of the precious papers" (96). Joseph Church, for example, indicates in relation to the ambiguous "it" (96), which preceded the phrase, the "loss" can be of Tina, money, Aspern, male authority (as John Carlos Rowe suggests) or even Cumnor (Church 39). Or, the loss may be of "the Romantic Past" in the face of modernity (Bell

127), the past the narrator tries to restore. The loss is of the “self” (Veeder 40) in William Veeder’s psychoanalytic interpretation. Jeanne Campbell Reesman develops her idea about the narrator’s loss of himself, in relation to the women surrounding him. Evan Carton also argues the loss of “personal identity” (118) and “the unified self” (120), in relation to Harold Bloom’s idea of the “anxiety of influence.” Church further argues that the variety of interpretations derives from the loss of not one but many possibilities, and it seems also that the “loss” in recent criticism is more or less concerned with the question of identity: material, personal, gendered or cultural. The problem of the self and identity is also James’s. Millicent Bell’s discussion of the concept of the “*visitable* past” (James xxxi) in James’s preface to *The Aspern Papers* also focuses on the issue of identity; that of the narrator and of James himself.

Moreover, identities are interrelated. The question of national identity is one of the most important factors in this novel. By drawing on James’s preface, which was written some twenty years after the original edition, critics have discussed who Jeffrey Aspern may have been. According to James, he was prompted to write *The Aspern Papers* by the story of Jane Clairmont, who was said to have been a mistress of Lord Byron. James further writes:

... I felt myself more concerned with the mere strong fact of her having testified for the reality and the closeness of our relation to the past.... (xxix)

It was ‘amusing,’ in any case, always, to try experiments; and the experiment for the right *transposition* of my Juliana would be to fit her out with an immortalising poet as transposed as herself. I felt I couldn’t cover mine more than in postulating a comparative American Byron to match an American Miss Clairmont.... (xxxiii)

James says that he envisioned an “American Byron.” Some critics agree with his view that Aspern is an American Byron. Some argue that Aspern’s model is Hawthorne,¹⁾ Poe or even Whitman.²⁾

These perspectives are interesting because of the readings they suggest. In my view, however, what matters most in the above quotations is James’s confusing statement concerning “the past” and the “transposition” of European subjects into American subjects. While taking up American subjects, which relate him to the past of Europe, James seems to insist that he is

¹⁾ For example, Gary Scharnhorst develops a persuading argument in favor of Hawthorne as the model.

²⁾ Jeremy Tambling points out Aspern’s similarity to Whitman in James’s description of Aspern.

dealing with the possible “visitable” past of America.

In the following, I will discuss the story by focusing on the characters’ nationality and identity, especially on the narrator’s, and their ambiguity between the continents (Chapter II); and draw on recent theories of nationality and identity (Chapter III). Chapter IV will discuss James’s project, before concluding.

II

The narrator is a literary critic and is especially concerned with Jeffrey Aspern’s literary career. According to the narrator, Aspern is a “god” (2), a god who created American literature and who is the creation of American literature. The narrator’s interest in Aspern’s poetry is singularly related to Aspern’s personal experience in Europe and his nationality. The narrator explains his obsession with Aspern as follows:

It was a much more important fact, if one was looking at his genius critically, that he had lived in the days before the general transfusion. It had happened to me to regret that he had known Europe at all; I should have lived to see what he would have written without that experience, by which he had incontestably been enriched. But as his fate had ruled otherwise I went with him – I tried to judge how the general old order would have struck him. It was not only there, however, I watched him; the relations he had entertained with the special new had even a livelier interest. His own country after all had had most of his life, and his muse, as they said at that time, was essentially American. That was originally what I had prized him for: that at a period when our native land was nude and crude and provincial, when the famous ‘atmosphere’ it is supposed to lack was not even missed, when literature was lonely there and art and form almost impossible, he had found means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, understand and express everything. (32-3)

It is important that his project is concerned with American literature, especially in relation to Europe. What inspires the narrator is the way Aspern was able to establish a sort of American literature without any preceding literary tradition in an American land, which was antagonistic, “nude,” “crude” and “provincial.” The narrator is also inspired by the way in which Aspern’s literary nature remains “essentially American” even after Aspern’s long acquaintance with European culture. The narrator focuses on Aspern’s era and concludes that it

was before “the general transfusion” of American and European influence. Located in the present “general transfusion,” the narrator tries to make clear the boundary between the natures of American and European cultures.

The setting is important in this regard. It is Venice, although most of the characters are Americans. The aged Juliana Bordereau, who possesses the letters at issue, lives “obscurely” (1) in a large, old palace in Venice with her middle-aged niece, Miss Tina. The narrator therefore comes to Venice to acquire the papers. He even rents some of their rooms as a lodger.

Venice has an extensive importance for the narrator. For him, there is a unity of art in the city. He says:

My eccentric private errand became a part of the general romance and the general glory – I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing? That element was in everything that Jeffrey Aspern had written, and I was only bringing to light. (28)

It is a unity of tradition, piled up by past artists. For the narrator, Venice is a place where not only the spirit of Aspern but also the spirits of other past artists gather and meet. He feels “a mystic companionship” and “a moral fraternity” with them. In the narrator’s mind, Jeffrey Aspern’s art is influenced by this tradition. In other words, according to the narrator, Aspern’s originality, which is an essential American-ness, simultaneously entails European influence. Aspern’s literature should be regarded as not only unique and valuable but also significantly related to European culture.

In spite of his insistence on Aspern’s literary value, what concerns the narrator most is not the study of the letters for the sake of a better understanding of Aspern’s poetry. Rather, it seems that the narrator is interested in the letters themselves: the process of acquiring the letters and the disclosure of Aspern’s personal life, full of gossip and love affairs. This implies a personal relationship with Aspern and in this sense, the narrator also addresses Aspern as “Mr. Aspern,” not as Jeffrey Aspern, just as the narrator himself points out that Miss Tina does in her letter. This is the reason the narrator says, “I’m a poor devil of a man of letters” (59) and Miss Bordereau calls him a “publishing scoundrel” (79).

According to the narrator, the letters contain the “truth” about Aspern’s life. The narrator states:

We held, justly, as I think, that we had done more for his memory than anyone else, and had done it simply by opening lights into his life. He had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the truth, which alone at such a distance of time we could be interested in establishing. (3)

“Establishing the truth” is his stated intention. Interestingly, the narrator himself reveals and implies a potential fear of their establishing the truth arising from the project. The arrogance and hypocrisy of the project is pointed out by Miss Bordereau. She asks:

‘Do you think it’s right to rake up the past?’

‘I don’t feel that I know what you mean by raking it up. How can we get at it unless we dig a little? The present has such a rough way of treading it down.’

‘Oh I like the past, but I don’t like critics,’ my hostess declared with her hard complacency.

‘Neither do I, but I like their discoveries.’

‘Aren’t they mostly lies?’

‘The lies are what they sometimes discover,’ I said, smiling at the quiet impertinence of this. ‘They often lay bare the truth.’

‘The truth is God’s, it isn’t man’s: we had better leave it alone. Who can judge of it? – who can say?’

‘We’re terribly in the dark, I know,’ I admitted; ‘but if we give up trying what becomes of all the fine things? What becomes of the work I just mentioned, that of the great philosophers and poets? It’s all vain words if there’s nothing to measure it by.’

‘You talk as if you were a tailor,’ said Miss Bordereau whimsically;... (60)

Actually, there is an implication that the narrator is appropriating the truth in order to make it fit his expectations. For example, he says:

There had been an impression about 1825 that he had ‘treated her badly’, just as there had been an impression that he had ‘served’, as the London populace says, several other ladies in the same masterful way. Each of these cases Cumnor and I had been able to investigate, and we had never failed to acquit him conscientiously of any grossness. I

judged him perhaps more indulgently than my friend; certainly, at any rate, it appeared to me that no man could have walked straighter in the given circumstances. (3)

This declaration shows that the “truth,” the result of their investigation, is exposed to a variety of judgements. It seems that even his comrade, Cumnor, gave a different judgement of “the truth.” Their procedure, which appears to be objective and scientific, is actually a subjective process. The narrator, as a literary critic, can handle the truth.

Moreover, in the case of the Aspern papers, the narrator makes use of their vague identity. In a sense, it seems that there is nothing stable about the letters. Although the narrator persistently believes in their existence, he cannot even see them. The only evidence of their existence is the narrator’s instinct about the phrase “Mr. Aspern” in Miss Tina’s reply and her own unreliable statements. For the reader, too, the letters do not make any appearance in the story and therefore their identity remains vague.

The narrator at one point compares Jeffrey Aspern to a god enshrined in a “temple” (3), of which he and his “English fellow worshipper” (3) John Cumnor are “the appointed ministers” (3). According to the narrator, Aspern’s increasing recognition owes much to them as the ministers, who have uncovered Aspern’s lost history and enshrined him as a god. However, in this sense, the god of Aspern is given importance by the ministers as a result of their judgement. In short, the essential value of Aspern’s literary work as a touchstone of American literature is a fiction.

The narrator, “a critic, a commentator, a historian” (59), writes about the great philosophers and poets of the past on their behalf. It is even possible to say that the narrator tries to be the subject matter in the fiction. The narrator tries to unite with Jeffrey Aspern, or, more appropriately, “Mr. Aspern.” From the beginning, it seems that the narrator tries to trace Aspern’s pilgrimage to Europe and relive his life with Miss Bordereau. The narrator identifies himself with Aspern; he often makes the mistake of thinking of Aspern as his contemporary. He does the same with Miss Bordereau, and even Miss Tina is not an exception. The narrator longs to touch Miss Bordereau’s hand since to do so would be to strengthen his identification with Aspern. Accordingly, the narrator denies the “truth” of the reality which opposes his imagination; he can hardly tolerate Miss Bordereau’s worldly desire for money. It is not the letters themselves but the process of recovering them that the narrator really wants.

The following quotation clearly shows the narrator’s identification with Aspern’s god-like status. He is under the delusion that Aspern is always beside him and comes back in response

to his call. The narrator says:

That spirit kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face – in which all his genius shone – of the great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine and that we should see it fraternally and fondly to a conclusion. (28)

In his vision, Aspern's spirit is hovering before him and responds in the way the narrator wishes. The god Aspern gives him words, but they are the words of the narrator's self. Thus, the narrator's project is a self-reflexive one. Contrary to his explanation, the truth of Aspern comes from the narrator's own subjective judgement.

Actually, the narrator's original identity is always obscure. The narrator declares that he is an American who has spent much time in Europe. Aspern's intercontinental circumstances also apply to the narrator. He emphasises that he has "guarantees" which are valid internationally, in Venice, England and America, while enjoying anonymity in the guise of "a most respectable inoffensive person" (16). For example, he does not give his true name to the Misses Bordereau until late in the story. He gives a visiting-card to Juliana Bordereau and Miss Tina, on which a false name is neatly engraved, not handwritten.

On the other hand, Juliana Bordereau and Miss Tina, two important figures in the story, are also personally mysterious and free from any nationality.³⁾ According to the narrator, they appear to have lost "all national quality" "in their long exile" (1). The narrator does not know the personal history of the two in detail. Deprived of many opportunities to face them in person, he does not know their present lifestyle, either. He knows that they are Americans of French descent who have lived in Europe for a long time. Juliana has been in Europe nearly three quarters of a century. It seems, however, that they behave differently from the familiar "strange ways" (30) of other Americans in Europe. They lack the distinctive characteristics of American expatriates. Miss Tina confesses to the narrator that they do not "seem to be anything now" (12). Having had no "native marks and notes" (30), they could even be "Norwegians or Spaniards" (30-31).

³⁾ The relationship between Juliana and Tina is debatable. Bernard Richards asks why the two are "The Misses Bordereau" (Richards 124). Tina is introduced as Juliana's niece, but actually, she might be Juliana's daughter by Aspern. Rowe also suggests that "Tina is the illegitimate daughter of Juliana Bordereau and Jeffrey Aspern" (Rowe 105).

Although the narrator is sure that Juliana and Miss Tina are deprived of nationality, their behaviour interestingly has something in common with the characteristics which the narrator ascribes to the typical American. Their deserted residence and provinciality in Venice, the unkempt conditions of the rooms and the garden, and the initial innocence and crudeness of Miss Tina, all recall the words which he uses to characterize America; “nude,” “crude,” “provincial” and “lonely” (33). Their residence gives the atmosphere of “a Protestant Sunday” (5), although they are actually “Catholics” (82). In addition, their persistent greed for money, which very much irritates the narrator, rather indicates their involvement in capitalism. Their location in “the middle of the sea” (17), their palace and the garden surrounded by canals, is likely to be associated with the North American continent. Actually, Miss Bordereau and Miss Tina are cut off from the rest of European society, and may in consequence have become more “American” in others’ eyes. In this sense, Rowe’s association of “Bordereau” with “border” (115) applies here as well. Two Bordereaus are “what stand [s] at the edge” (Rowe 115), blurring the edge that divides Europe from America in others’ eyes.

Thus, it seems that the story is about a contest over obscure papers, between figures who lack a stable identity, and who are natives of America but seem to have some difficulty in having a sense of belonging to specific places and in having a continuity of identity in others’ eyes.

This obscurity persists. When everything seems to have become clear, it ends in obscurity again. After the death of Miss Bordereau, Miss Tina gives him a portrait supposedly of Aspern. Then she tells the narrator that the letters are now in her hands and implies that the letters will be his if he marries her in exchange for them. The papers are burnt by Miss Tina because the narrator declines her offer of marriage.

Miss Bordereau is dead and Miss Tina goes back to her previous life. As for the narrator, he cannot jump at Miss Tina’s surprising offer, even if marriage would allow him to finally grasp the precious papers. Rather, he flees, thinking, “I couldn’t, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman.” (92) Placed against marriage, the precious papers turn out to be “a bundle of tattered papers.” Marriage is a serious involvement in actual life, and he backs away from that involvement.

In short, his project is flawed and results in failure. The narrator always comes and goes between the palace and the outside of the world through the canals. At Miss Tina’s surprising offer, the narrator leaves the “American continent” for the European society of Venice on a gondola, which gives him the only connection with the outside world. In Venice, however, the narrator has a strange feeling. He confesses:

I don't know why it happened that on this occasion I was more than ever struck with that queer air of sociability, of cousinship and family life, which makes up half the expression of Venice. (93)

As you sit in your gondola the footways that in certain parts edge the canals assume to the eye the importance of a stage, meeting it at the same angle, and Venetian figures, moving to and fro against the battered scenery of their little houses of comedy, strike you as members of an endless dramatic troupe. (94)

The narrator feels that he is terribly distanced from the lives of the people in Venice. Venetian daily life appears to be a comedy on a stage, and he cannot be involved in it. In fact, however, it is possible to view all his actions as the true comedy. In spite of all his efforts and expenses, he cannot find any actual connection with Europe. The "mystic companionship" and "moral fraternity" were a fiction. Consequently, it was impossible for him to clarify what essential American-ness was. When he returns to Miss Tina the following day, she no longer wants to get married with him. For the narrator, his project results in a failure. He could not extract anything stable; he fails to clarify the nature of Aspern's literature and he fails to establish an American tradition and literature.

For the reader of the story, the loss of the Aspern papers makes it difficult to identify the content of the story. To know the content of the letters would mean that the reader would know something stable about the story; they are not informed whether Aspern really is a great poet, who the Misses Bordereau are, nor even who the "I" is that narrates the story. What does it mean to dig up the past, as Juliana Bordereau asks critically? What is the truth of Aspern's life? Is it a question only God can answer, as Juliana suggests? It seems that the story rather questions whether there is anything "essentially" Aspern's or "essentially" American in the first place.

III

At this point, I would like to draw on several perspectives concerning the concepts of nation, culture and individual. Recent theories are also relevant in this reading of *The Aspern Papers*.

The concept of nation has been challenged: a nation is not a self-evident and autonomous entity, but a creation of modernity. A French historian, Ernest Renan traced back the elements

which had made a nation a “nation.” In his analysis, no origins such as race, language, religion, material interest, geography or military necessity are adequate to explain the concept. A nation could involve communities of diverse ranges, each of which has its own memories and which have almost nothing in common (Renan 11). He indicates that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (11). According to him, a nation is “a spiritual principle” (19) and consists of the possession of a common legacy of the past.

Recently, Benedict Anderson further extends the analysis and defines the concept of nation as an “imagined” community, which is imagined as “both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 4). In his formulation, nationality or nation-ness, and nationalism are “cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (4), and therefore, nationalism has to be understood in relation to large cultural systems that “preceded” it, out of which – against which – it came into being (12). A modern nation makes its people “imagine” as a unity and keeps its identity through time and space. For this reason, it needs a sort of common “History” constructed through selection, explanation and narration of the past (197), and continuously addresses individuals and keeps “memory of independence” in a nation’s mind (197). Individuals identify themselves with the nation through its “History.”

Nation is not a self-evident entity, and the idea of a stable national identity is also undermined. According to this concept, all identities, including national identity, are formed and transformed under the influence of the linguistic, social and cultural systems surrounding them. The idea of a stable self and its identity are fictional products. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the leading figures in postcolonial theory focuses on the question of culture and the process of making “the other” in the postmodern world. He focuses on the cultural fusion within a nation, “hybridities” (*Location* 2) in his conception, because it makes cultures cognizable and also opens a space for negotiations between cultures. He thinks that minorities occupy historically and temporally “disjunct” positions within the nation’s space. Bhabha associates the condition of third world migration with T. S. Eliot’s view of cultural situations in settler colonial societies:

The fatality of thinking of ‘local’ cultures as uncontaminated or self-contained forces us to conceive of ‘global’ cultures, which itself remains unimaginable. (“Culture’s” 54)

Eliot thinks that people who have migrated take with them “a part of the total culture” (*Notes* 64). Bhabha observes that this “part” culture is culture’s ‘in-between,’ which is “in

excess” of cultural difference (*Location 2*), and which shows the boundary between cultures and will be the “tissue” connecting each culture. That is, Eliot’s explanation leads to the understanding of “culture-as-difference” (“Culture’s” 55), and through the recognition of culture, Bhabha indicates the potentiality of grasping the boundary between cultures and also the “articulation” of space and time, which foregrounds the authority of any entailed discourse.

It seems that the concept of “culture-as-difference” and the collapse of a stable self is relevant to *The Aspern Papers*. The narrator tries to clarify an essential “American-ness” as well as a kind of essential Aspern, but his subjective viewpoint prevents him from acquiring any such concept. In other words, the narrator tries to make Aspern’s work a canon,⁴⁾ which possesses the “truth” and the “History” of America, and through the attempt, a sense of community. However, this attempt is vain.

In a sense, the three characters are placed “in-between” cultures and are often possessors of “‘part’ culture,” in a broad sense. They often lack a strong sense of belonging to any specific society, – a sense of national or cultural identity – which would also shape their personal identity. The characters struggle between the cultures of Europe and America, and their conflict is also concerned with the relationship between individuals and societies.

The three, Juliana Bordereau, Miss Tina and the narrator, seclude themselves from society and avoid involvement in it. Throughout the story, they remain on the verge or the boundary, related to society without fully getting involved in it. However, it seems that their detachment and aloofness are not a rejection of society, but rather a search for an ideal relationship with it. On the one hand, Juliana and Tina are secluding themselves from the rest of society, but they enjoy the narrator’s company to some extent. On the other hand, the narrator’s cultivation of the garden, possibly a metaphor for the cultivation of American literary history, involves at the same time the cultivation of their mental garden. If in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer’s garden (*PL* 56) relates to her free mentality, the Misses Bordereaus’ garden is also related to their mental freedom.

IV

What about Henry James’s narration? James wrote *The Aspern Papers* about a century after American Independence and two decades after the Civil War. Severed from the “metropolitan” world, the Old World, it is said that America has possessed a sense of both rivalry

⁴⁾ See John Guillory’s “Canon.”

and adoration towards Europe. By officially declaring independence, America seemed to have established a truly independent and united nation. However, the Civil War made it obvious that the nation was not actually unified.

Under the circumstances, it seems that James was trying to find an exclusively American identity. He states:

We [Americans] have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick up and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it. ...To have no national stamp has hitherto been a defect and a drawback, but I think it is not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. We must of course have something of our own – something distinctive and homogeneous –. ... (*HJL* 77)

In struggling to disrupt the idea that Americans' lack of "national stamp" is "a defect and a drawback," he describes its capacity to absorb and integrate various aspects of existent national tendencies and to transform them into its own distinctive and homogeneous quality.

James's statement singularly overlaps with the narrator's project. To observe this project and its failure, however, turns the story into a question. James, making use of the narrator, is trying to take hold of, and even to blur and change, the meaning of the past and the pre-existing cultural boundary between Europe and the United States. James, by showing the ineffectiveness of the narrator's project, avoids giving an ultimate answer to a fully essential literary tradition. James's writing is eternally asking itself and its reader whether anything is ever self-evident and essential; whether there is a point of view, from which "the truth" always appears as the truth.

In the last scene, the portrait of "Jeffrey Aspern" (96), not of Mr. Aspern, hangs above the narrator's writing-table. This is indicative of his loss – "of the precious letters" (96), which is actually the failure of his project. In his statement quoted in my Chapter I, the narrator pretends that his loss is only of the Aspern papers, but the awkward phrase, "I mean," reveals that the loss is more than the papers. The portrait does not allow the narrator to identify himself with Aspern. Moreover, the Aspern in the portrait prevents the narrator from writing in Aspern's place, because Aspern exists as an absolute other.

Concerning the narrator's ultimate failure, some critics point out the success inherent in the

failure; William Veeder indicates the narrator's ("the editor's" in his terms) success in his possessing the supposed portrait of Aspern. Some other critics regard his writing as his success. The editor of the text I use, Adrian Poole, supports this idea by saying "What he [the narrator] does succeed in giving, however, is the story of his failure. He never gets to read the Aspern papers, but he succeeds in writing 'The Aspern Papers' " (xii). Joseph Church rightly suggests that the "loss" "enables the narrator to write the narrative that we readers find so productive" (40). Julie Rivkin shares the same view: "In 'losing' the papers, he [the narrator] has in fact found a way of preserving them, for their account is kept in every line of the tale that records their sacrifice." (141)

However, even if the narrator obtains the portrait, or writes the story, the portrait denies the standpoint which the narrator initially hopes to take. The story cannot contribute to his intention either. The story challenges the readers of a "literary heart" (27) by prompting them to think over the legitimacy of the concepts of canon, tradition, culture and nationality.

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